

A day in the life of a Roman child?

Eleanor Dickey

Greek speakers living in the Roman empire needed to learn Latin, and some of the elementary Latin readers that were created to teach them survive. Eleanor Dickey here explores how this sort of text can give us information about the lives of the people who used it. Ancient textbooks like this are composite works, with different sections originally composed at different times for different purposes and sometimes later reworked by teachers who were using them in new ways. The textbooks were in use for at least six centuries and probably longer; naturally, in that time there were changes in the world their readers came from. We cannot always tell whether their depictions of daily life were realistic or idealized even to begin with, and if some of the details seem familiar to us and others alien, perhaps the same would have been true for some of the ancient readers as well. But overall, as Eleanor's article shows, these textbooks can give us at least a glimpse of some of the details of life that grander Classics authors can overlook.

What did Roman children do first upon waking up in the morning? What did they bring with them to school, and what did they do when they got there? When and how did they study, and what did they have for lunch? The answers to these ques-

tions cannot be found in mainstream Latin literature, for Roman authors normally had their minds on higher things. But they can be found in an obscure set of texts known as the *Colloquia of the Hermeneumata Pseudo-dositheana*.



A student arriving at school greets the teacher, as depicted on a second-century A.D. sandstone relief from a tomb at Neumagen, now in the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Trier, Germany. Drawing: Eleanor Dickey.

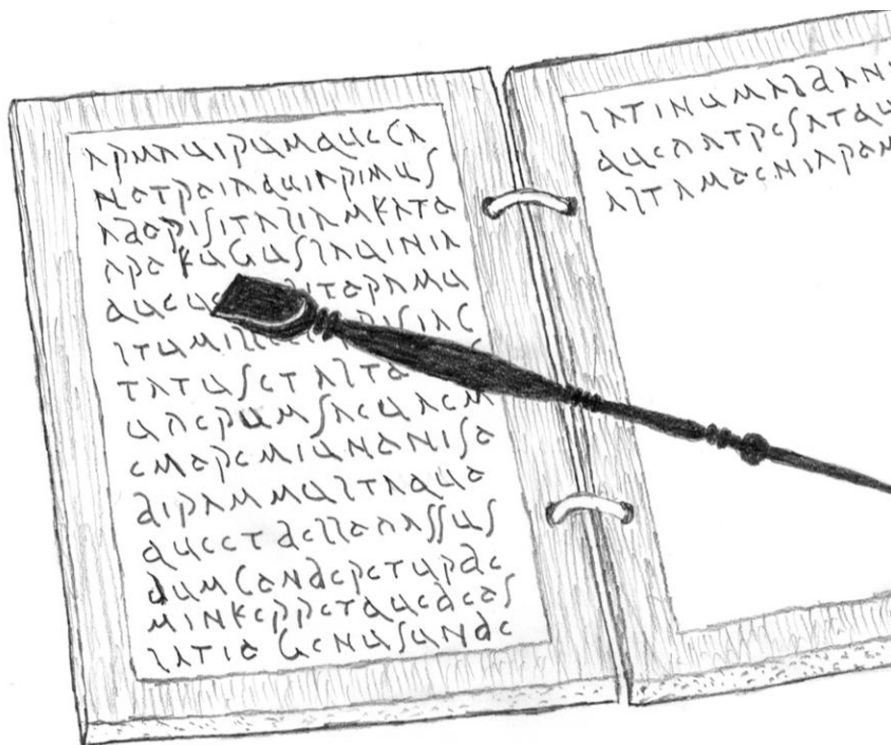
These were originally composed in Republican Rome as easy readers for primary-school children learning ancient Greek; later they were expanded and adapted in the Eastern Empire as easy readers for Greek speakers learning Latin. They were equally useful for both purposes because they are bilingual, with each story presented in both languages.

Most of the *Colloquia* describe the day of a well-off schoolboy, starting at dawn. This boy has his own personal slave boy, who opens the bedroom shutters so the schoolboy can have light to get out of bed, brings him water to wash his face, and carries his things to school. In one version the schoolboy narrator describes the morning as follows:

When I was woken up in the morning, I called my slave boy. I told him to open the shutters, and he did so quickly. I got up and sat on the frame of the bed, asking him to bring my shoes and leggings, for it was cold. Once I had my shoes on he gave me a clean towel and a little jug of water to wash my face. I poured it first over my hands and then washed my face, remembering to close my mouth, and I scrubbed my teeth and gums, remembering to spit rather than swallow. I blew my nose, and when I was completely clean I dried my hands, arms, and face. It is important for a free-born boy to be clean when he goes to school. Then I asked someone to bring my book and stylus, and handed them to my slave boy to carry to school for me. When I was all ready I went forth in auspicious fashion, with my paedagogue following me.

(Colloquium Stephani 3a–8a)

This story has some surprising omissions: the boy has neither gotten dressed (apart from the shoes and leggings) nor eaten breakfast. Fortunately, the *Colloquia* survive in six different versions, which can be compared to find out how to interpret such problems. From them we learn that children did normally get dressed in the morning, but they did not normally eat breakfast: none of the *Colloquia* contains any mention of breakfast. In this version,



Reconstructions of Roman wax tablet containing Virgil, Aeneid 1.1–7, and stylus.
Drawing: Eleanor Dickey.

the narrator continues:

I went straight through the colonnade that led to the school. Whenever I ran into people I knew, I greeted them, and they greeted me in return. When I came to the staircase, I went up it one step at a time, without running, as a boy should. Arriving in the school vestibule, I took off my cloak and hung it up, and I smoothed down my hair. Then I lifted the curtain over the doorway and entered the school. First I greeted the teachers and my fellow students, as a polite child should.
(Colloquium Stephani 8b–10a)

Evidently the narrator is a polite, well-behaved, and tidy little boy, as well as being a clean one (even if he appears to be naked from the knees up). This is typical: the Romans believed in teaching children by pointing out examples of good behaviour, on all levels, from the warrior who dies gloriously in battle to the child who goes up the stairs without running. And greeting everyone upon entering the school was a key part of being a well-behaved child, even though the school would have already been in session and the greetings therefore a significant interruption. Roman primary schools had no set start times, with each child simply starting work whenever he or she arrived; the earlier they arrived, the more education they would get, as parents paid a set fee per month regardless of how many hours per day their children actually spent in school. The teacher was obliged to be on duty starting at dawn, ready for the first

child to arrive. Our narrator is evidently not that first child, as there is already a group of students for him to greet; one of these would have been working individually with the teacher, and the others would have been studying independently, but the polite thing for the new arrival to do was to interrupt them all for greetings.

After exchanging greetings the schoolboy sits in his usual place – or tries to, for someone else may have taken his seat, resulting in a squabble.

'Fellow pupils, give me my place! Move over!' 'Go over there; this is my place; I got it first.' (Colloquium Leidense-Stephani 3c–4a)

Once the narrator is seated, his slave boy hands over the schoolbag and he starts work. Sometimes this means talking to the teacher, but often he simply resumes his independent work where he left it at the end of the previous school day, not going up to the teacher until the assigned task is completed. In the version below, the boy's first task is a writing exercise, for which he uses wax tablets. Romans wrote by gouging the wax with a sharp-pointed stylus; the stylus also had a flat back end for erasing the tablets by smoothing out the wax, so that they could be re-used. Here the teacher crosses out the writing after correcting the exercise, perhaps to make sure that the child does not re-submit it but instead gets the practice of writing again; this pupil must be at a fairly elementary stage of learning to write, for only at that stage did children need ruled lines on their tablets.

My slave boy, who carried my case of books, handed me my writing tablets, stylus case, and ruler. I sat down in my place and rubbed out the writing on my wax tablets. I ruled lines following the model. When I had written my exercise, I showed my work to the teacher, who corrected it, crossed it out, and then ordered me to read aloud. I read until he asked me to pass the book to the next pupil. Then I learned my bilingual textbook thoroughly and recited it. (Colloquia Monacensia-Einsidlensia 2h–j)

Writing was only one of the three typical exercises of ancient schools, and the narrator here quickly moves on to the second of these, reading aloud. Reading was far more difficult in antiquity than it is today, because there were no spaces between the words, no distinction between capital and lower-case letters, and usually no punctuation. In order to read aloud well, therefore, one had to think carefully about how to divide an unbroken string of capital letters into words, sentences, and paragraphs. The boy here is reading from a 'book' (probably a roll of papyrus) owned by the teacher, which is passed around the class so that more than one pupil can use it; such sharing of books was common in antiquity, as they could only be created by being copied out by hand and were therefore expensive.

The third typical school exercise was memorization and recitation. In a striking self-reference, the text being memorized here seems to be this *Colloquium*. It is very convenient for us to have this self-reference, as otherwise we might not have been able to figure out how Roman children actually used their bilingual Greek-learning texts. Nowadays, language learners are encouraged to interact directly with the language they are learning, by reading or hearing material in that language; the last thing one of today's language teachers would do is to provide beginners with a translation. Yet in antiquity beginners always used bilingual texts, which they memorized; only after learning these by heart did they move on to reading and translating monolingual texts in the foreign language. The reason is that without spaces between words it is impossible to use a dictionary until you know some vocabulary: you cannot look up a word if you do not know where it begins or ends. So ancient language learners had to memorize a reasonable amount of vocabulary before they could start reading anything. Consider the difference between the two passages below, both of which are written with ancient conventions: the first is reasonably comprehensible to English speakers, but the second one is hopeless unless you have already

learned rather a lot of Latin.

JINGLEBELLSJINGLEBELLS-
JINGLEALLTHEWAY
OHWHATFUNITISTORIDE
INAONEHORSEOPENSLEIGH

VTBELLISIGNVMLAVRENTI-
TVRNVSABARCE
EXTVLITETRAVCO-
STREPVERVNTCORNVACANTV
(Virgil, Aeneid 8.1–2)

Roman primary schools usually contained a variety of children of different ages, all doing different things. In addition to the main teacher, there were often one or more assistants, and the older pupils might also teach the youngest ones. One narrator explains:

Meanwhile, as the teacher ordered, the littlest pupils got up to practise the alphabet; they were taught by one of the bigger pupils, who gave them syllables to practise on. Those in the middle group recited in order before the teacher's assistant; they wrote their names or copied verses. And in the top class, I received an exercise to do. We sat down, and I prepared my text using a commentary, glossary, and grammar. When the teacher called me up to read he explained the text to me, both what it meant and who the speakers of the different lines were. Then I answered his questions, such as 'Who is being addressed here?' and 'What part of speech is this word?'. I declined nouns of various genders and parsed a verse. (Colloquia Monacensia-Einsidlensia 2m-r)

This narrator is reading a dramatic text, which posed additional challenges because ancient copies of tragedies and comedies did not indicate which characters were supposed to speak which lines; all the speaker designations in modern copies of Greek plays are later editorial additions. The ancient reader had to do a lot of interpretative work that a modern reader does not need to do, simply in order to understand the basic plot of a play. And along with the interpretative training went grammatical training, for a solid command of grammar was essential in order to learn how to make the most of the interpretative clues that the text did offer.

At lunchtime the boy goes home to eat,

and at this point his narrative usually stops abruptly; we do not get to find out about ancient after-school activities.

*When we had finished, the teacher sent us home for lunch. I came home, changed my clothes, and received my lunch of white bread, olives, cheese, dried figs, and nuts. I drank chilled water.
(Colloquia Monacensia-Einsidlensia 2s-t)*

Eleanor Dickey is Professor of Classics at Reading University, where she works on the languages and literatures of the ancient world. Among her interests is the question of how languages were taught in antiquity, and recently she has written extensively on the bilingual reader described here.

*If you would like to find out more about Eleanor's research into ancient education, have a look at her book *Stories of Daily Life from the Roman World* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), from which the extracts quoted here are taken. You may also be interested in the events she runs to re-create an ancient school experience for modern students: see www.readingancientschoolroom.com*